

Los Angeles County
Museum of Art

Early
Renaissance
Art in Italy
and Spain

Because the works of art shown
in the galleries are sometimes
changed, certain works discussed
here may not be on view at the
present time.

Gallery Guide

The Renaissance was a period of European history spanning approximately three hundred years, from 1300 to 1600, when the medieval world gradually awoke to new ideas in all areas of human endeavor. Much that was "new" was actually inspired by ancient Greece and Rome, remnants of whose cultures had been preserved, but it was only when artists and scholars began consciously referring to and adapting classical sources that the Renaissance, meaning "rebirth," came into being. The replication of antique forms began in Italy and soon spread to France, Germany, the Low Countries (modern-day Netherlands and Belgium), and Spain. The Renaissance in the visual arts was manifested differently in each country, tempered by the forms and traditions inherent to each nation.

Many paintings of the early Renaissance (the years from 1300 to 1500) were originally part of altarpieces, commissioned for churches or private chapels, in which elaborate gilded frames separated areas painted with a variety of images, the most common being the Madonna and Child, often accompanied by saints.

The works of art in this gallery trace the development from a medieval worldview that was largely otherworldly to a more humanistic conception that embraced direct observations from nature and emphasized life on earth. Although the majority of subjects depicted were still religious, the forms used by artists reflected their growing awareness of both naturalism and ancient Greek and Roman models. There was also a gradual introduction of secular (especially historical and mythological) subject matter.

Painters of the early Renaissance worked on wood panels using tempera, an egg-based paint that produced brilliant, opaque colors. Tempera did not blend easily, so when oil was introduced as a binder in the mid-fifteenth century, it greatly increased the range of painterly effects. The traditional use of gold leaf for backgrounds, which removed the images from worldly associations, inhibited the illusion of pictorial space and was gradually abandoned as artists strove for greater naturalism.



Bartolo di Fredi

Italy, c. 1330–c. 1410

The Angel of the Annunciation and The Virgin of the Annunciation

1388

Tempera on panel

22½ x 11⅜ in. (57.2 x 28.9 cm)

and 22½ x 11¼ in. (57.2 x 28.6 cm)

Mr. and Mrs. Allan C. Balch Collection,

M.44.2.1 and M.44.2.2

Bartolo di Fredi was born in Siena, one of the major artistic centers of fourteenth-century Italy. It was here that in the early part of the century the artist Simone Martini had planted the seeds of the International Gothic, a lavish, courtly style that combined the elegant grace of French art with the newly emerging naturalism of Italian art.

The museum's panels were the pinnacles of an altarpiece painted for a Franciscan church in the little hill town of Montalcino, not far from Siena. (Like many altarpieces, it was dismantled for unknown reasons in the nineteenth century.) Bartolo's conception of the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary was directly inspired by Simone's most famous work, an *Annunciation* of 1333, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. In the left panel Gabriel kneels, holding an olive branch instead of the more traditional lily that was the symbol of Siena's rival, the city of Florence. His softly billowing cape suggests that he has just arrived to announce the Virgin's destiny as the mother of Jesus. She receives the news with humility and perhaps some reservation, almost recoiling from his message in a

graceful reversed S-curve, a form that was typical of the International Gothic style.

As the gold leaf has gradually lifted or been rubbed from the background and framing architectural elements of the panels, a red pigment is revealed, the clay-based bole that was intended to give the translucent gold a warm glow.



Luca di Tommè

Italy, c. 1330–after 1389

Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Nicholas and Paul

c. 1370

Tempera on panel

52¼ x 45⅞ in. (132.7 x 114.6 cm)

Gift of Samuel H. Kress, 31.22

Luca di Tommè was also from Siena and worked with Bartolo di Fredi in 1389 on an altarpiece for the shoemakers' guild in the city's cathedral. Like Bartolo, Luca was influenced by earlier Sienese art, in particular the paintings of Duccio da Buoninsegna, a contemporary of Simone Martini. In the late thirteenth century Duccio introduced more naturalistic poses, gestures, and facial expressions, as well as more convincing depictions of space, into Sienese painting.

An increased intensity of devotion to the Virgin Mary in the thirteenth century made her a popular subject throughout the Renaissance. As can be seen in the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Nicholas and Paul*, the central panel from an altarpiece, her role as Queen of Heaven is

emphasized. Much larger in scale than the flanking saints, she is the most imposing figure in the composition. On the left, Nicholas, bishop of Myra, can be identified by three golden balls that he gave anonymously as dowries for three destitute sisters who otherwise would have become prostitutes. On the right, the apostle Paul carries the book of his epistles and the sword of his martyrdom. The Christ Child in Mary's lap holds a scroll stating, *Ego sum lux mundi* (I am the light of the world).

The gold background, tooled haloes, sumptuous decorative patterns, and curved outlines are all influenced by the late medieval style of Simone Martini. Luca achieves a greater degree of naturalism, however, by rendering faces, figures, and drapery with volumetric shading and by depicting Mary's arms convincingly and tenderly enveloping the form of the child. Luca's foreshortening of the seated figure is less successful: because the position of Mary's lower body is not clearly delineated, Jesus seems to hover above her lap (this is due in part to the darkening of the costly ultramarine-blue pigment customarily used for the Virgin's mantle).



Ugolino di Nerio

Italy, active 1317–c. 1327

Worshipping Angels

c. 1325

Tempera on panel

17½ x 29½ in. (44.5 x 74.9 cm)

William Randolph Hearst Collection,
49.17.40

Ugolino di Nerio is first mentioned in a Sienese document of 1317. For about ten years Ugolino, whose father and two brothers were also painters, was active in Siena and in Florence, where he created altarpieces for the important churches of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella.

The Los Angeles painting was part of Ugolino's large (now disassembled) altarpiece painted in 1325 for the high altar of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce; it formed the spandrels that would have framed the now-lost central panel depicting the Madonna and Child. Other sections of the altarpiece are in the Metropolitan Museum, New York; the National Gallery, London; and the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Ugolino gives subtle nuances of expression to each angel through variations of color and a sensitive depiction of gesturing hands. Two damaged heads on the left have been restored with a technique of colored hatching that suggests their original form but does not attempt to recreate their features. The slight green coloration of the faces and hands of this and other early Renaissance paintings comes from *terre verte* (green earth), a pigment that was applied as underpainting to indicate the artist's intended pattern of shadows and highlights and to give greater vibrancy to the flesh tones.



Martino di Bartolomeo

Italy, active 1389–1434/35

Coronation of the Virgin

c. 1400

Tempera on panel

34 $\frac{13}{16}$ x 26 in. (88.4 x 66 cm)

William Randolph Hearst Collection,

49.17.6

Martino di Bartolomeo's name first appeared on a list of painters in Siena in 1389. Between 1402 and 1405 he is documented as working in Pisa. In 1405 he returned to Siena, where he completed frescoes for the cathedral and the Palazzo Pubblico, or city hall. Many of his works are preserved in Siena, but very few are dated. The museum's painting is thought to be from about 1400, based on dated works that are similar in style.

The arch-shaped image was no doubt part of a large altarpiece whose other elements cannot now be identified. At the time of its acquisition the *Coronation of the Virgin* was framed by the spandrels of *Worshiping Angels* now attributed to Ugolino di Nerio. In order to fit the spandrels Martino's panel had been enlarged sometime in the nineteenth century. When the panels were separated in the 1950s, the *Coronation* was restored to its original dimensions.

The image shows the final triumph of the Virgin Mary, as she is crowned by Christ after being

assumed bodily into heaven. The dove of the Holy Spirit hovers over the scene. While retaining the grace characteristic of Sienese painting, Martino's central figures have sculptural presence and are covered by draperies that fall in natural curves and folds, suggesting the weight of the cloth. The traditional double throne on which the Virgin and Christ are seated is without depth, however, and so they too, like the Christ Child in Luca di Tommè's panel, seem to hover against their background.



School of Andrés Marzal de Sas

Spain, active c. 1394–1410

Saint Michael Fighting the Dragon

c. 1400

Tempera on panel

54 x 24 in. (137.2 x 61 cm)

Gift of Dr. Armand Hammer, 49.32.1

Andrés Marzal de Sas was of German origin and worked in Valencia, Spain, in collaboration with the Italian Pedro Nicolau from 1390 to 1408. Little is known about either

of these artists, but for stylistic reasons the unknown artist who painted this image is thought to be their follower.

The panel was probably part of a large polyptych, that is, an altarpiece composed of many panels. It depicts an episode from the book of Revelation 12:7–9a: "Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon with his angels fought back, but he was too weak, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who led the whole world astray, whose name is the Devil, or Satan." The Archangel Michael is the weigher of the souls of the dead; at the Last Judgment he presents the good souls to God and consigns the bad souls to eternal suffering.

Saint Michael is always depicted as a beautiful young man clad in armor. Here he tramples underfoot the devil, or dragon, and pierces the evil creature with his spear. His splendid red wings fill the space around him and are shown to good advantage against the gold background, indicating the battle's heavenly venue. The image is Gothic in conception, with its graceful curves, delicate surface decoration, and gargoyle-like devil. This *Saint Michael* makes an interesting comparison with an eighteenth-century Neapolitan sculpture of the same theme by Domenico Antonio Vaccaro in gallery 216.



Neri di Bicci

Italy, 1419–c. 1491

Madonna and Child with Saints

c. 1440

Tempera on panel

29 x 35 in. (73.5 x 89 cm)

Gift of Varya and Hans Cohn in honor of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary, M.91.15

Neri di Bicci was born in Florence, the son of the painter Bicci di Lorenzo. Between the years 1453 and 1475 Neri kept a journal of his daily activities that tells us much about his life. He was extremely productive, and his works may be seen in churches and galleries throughout Florence. He also directed a workshop with numerous apprentices and assistants.

The intimate scale of the museum's triptych suggests that it served as a domestic altarpiece for private devotions, one whose size also made it portable; with its wings closed, the central image would be protected. The image is of a type popular in the Renaissance, the *sacra conversazione* (sacred conversation). Typically, the Madonna and Child are surrounded by a group of saints, whose identity and number vary according to the wishes of the patron. Here, the central figures are flanked by two early Christian martyrs holding the martyr's palm: Saint Catherine of Alexandria, identified by her book and the wheel on which she was tortured, and Saint Lucy, holding a lamp, which refers to her name, derived

from *lux*, meaning "light" in Latin. Appearing in the lower register of the wings are four more saints, from left to right, Anthony Abbot, Bernardino of Siena, Lawrence, and Julian. The Annunciation is depicted on the upper sections of the wings.

Although the artist has retained a gold ground, perhaps at the insistence of the patron, the classical revival of the Renaissance is evidenced by the ancient Roman architectural elements of the baldachin (canopy) over the Madonna and Child.



Bernardo Rosselli

Italy, 1450–1526

The Triumph of Darius

c. 1485

Tempera on panel

61½ x 16¾ in (155.2 x 41.5 cm)

Phil Berg Collection, M.71.73.371

The Florentine Bernardo Rosselli was one of the pupils of Neri di Bicci and a prolific painter of *cassoni*, or clothing chests. During the Renaissance these chests were given as bridal gifts and were prominently displayed in the wealthy home. Major painters such as Paolo Uccello and Sandro Botticelli created *cassoni* panels, and important sculptors carved the elaborate chests (a fine walnut *cassone* from about 1500 may be seen in gallery 210). Usually decorated with mythological or historical scenes, the *cassone* was one of the first vehicles for the depiction of secular themes in the Renaissance.

Rosselli's panel presents a procession with the young Darius,

emperor of Persia in the fourth century B.C. and the opponent of Alexander the Great, riding in triumph in the center. Behind him, and a bit lower, ride his mother, wife, and two daughters. The composition is full of marvelous detail and rendered in gold and sumptuous, warm colors, bringing to mind numerous elaborate depictions of the Adoration of the Magi by Florentine artists such as Gentile da Fabriano and Benozzo Gozzoli, many of which reflected lavish religious processions and public pageants. Note that Rosselli did not clothe his figures in what he imagined to be the dress of ancient Persia but rather in the courtly fashions of his own time.



Marco Zoppo

Italy, 1432–1478

Fragment from the Cassone Panel "Shooting at Father's Corpse"

c. 1462

Tempera on panel

20½ x 27½ in. (52.1 x 69.9 cm)

Gift of Howard Ahmanson, Jr.,

M.81.259.1

Marco Zoppo was born Marco di Ruggero in Cento near Bologna and spent time in Padua and Venice. His surviving oeuvre is relatively small: only three altarpieces (two of which have been disassembled), a handful of devotional works, and several manuscript illuminations and drawings have been securely identified.

The Los Angeles panel is the left half of a larger image that was cut

apart at an unknown date, presumably centuries ago (the right half is in a private collection in Florence). Only when the two segments are seen together can the scene be identified. It is a traditional story from the Babylonian Talmud regarding a dispute over an inheritance. Three sons were ordered by a judge to shoot arrows at their father's corpse. Two sons showed no hesitation, but the third refused to desecrate his father's body, and so was judged to be the true heir. The museum's panel shows the seated judge (who is sometimes represented as the wise King Solomon), spectators, and the good son, seen here at the far right with his back to the viewer; the Florentine panel depicts the two other young men shooting at the bound corpse.

The proportion of the panels when united suggests that the original painting was intended to decorate the side of a *cassone*, the traditional marriage chest given to newlyweds by their parents. The theme of filial piety would thus be a fitting subject for the decoration of that item of furniture.

Zoppo's figures are substantial and occupy a believable space. The squared pavement suggests that the artist had absorbed the new pictorial ideas of perspective and spatial construction that had been developed in Florence early in the fifteenth century. Zoppo adds further interest to the scene by depicting the judge and the figure at the far left in exotic eastern dress.



Jacopo Bellini

Italy, c. 1400–1470/71

Madonna and Child

c. 1465

Oil on panel

27⁷/₁₆ x 18¹/₂ in. (69.7 x 47 cm)

Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation,
M.85.223

Jacopo Bellini was born in Venice and is first recorded as a painter in 1424. He was a student of Gentile da Fabriano, who came to Venice in 1408 to execute frescoes for the Doge's Palace. Jacopo was the father of Giovanni and Gentile, who became the leading Venetian painters of the latter part of the century.

In the *Madonna and Child* Bellini combines realistic elements with the more archaic formulations of the Byzantine style. We saw a similar blending in the work of Luca da Tommè, but here, nearly a hundred years later, Bellini achieves a new level of naturalism. The Madonna even more convincingly gathers the child in her embrace. He, like a real baby, clutches at her mantle and presses close against her. Bellini had a sculptural prototype for his composition in a relief of the *Madonna and Child* by Donatello, the most important Italian sculptor of the early fifteenth century. From

this carved relief Bellini derived the placement of the hands and the tender intimacy between mother and baby. By turning the Madonna at a three-quarter angle, as Donatello had done, Bellini increases the illusion of three-dimensionality. By contrast, the figures are placed against a completely dark background that counters the sense of depth by emphasizing contour rather than volume, and the drapery folds create a surface pattern, as do the haloes and the medallions in the corners. The overall effect achieved by Bellini, however, is a masterful synthesis of the old and the new, in which he creates an image more intimate and tender than many renditions of the theme. The characters in the medallions are the first and last letters of the Greek words for "Mother of God," and Mary's halo is inscribed in Latin with the traditional words of the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee."



Domenico Gagini

Italy, c. 1420–1492

Allegorical Portrait of Ferdinand the Catholic, King of Aragon, Castile, and Naples

1473–79

Marble relief

31 x 63 in. (78.7 x 160 cm)

William Randolph Hearst Collection,
50.33.4

Domenico Gagini was born in Bissone, a village on Lake Lugano in northern Italy that for centuries had produced stone masons and sculptors. He went to Florence as a young man and studied under one

of the great architects of the early Renaissance, Filippo Brunelleschi. Gagini also worked in Genoa, Naples, and Sicily.

As worldliness and the sense of the individual's importance increased, portraiture became important in Renaissance art. Gagini's carved portrait of Ferdinand the Catholic (1452–1516) — the patron, with his wife Isabella, of Christopher Columbus — is a full-length representation of the king and presumably was part of a door frame in one of the monarch's Sicilian residences. The pose of the king, who holds the orb and scepter of power with authority, is meant to emphasize his divinely ordained status rather than to present a natural likeness. The similarity of the rigid, frontal figure to that of a religious icon is significant; this image was meant to substitute for the king's presence in a rarely visited outpost of his kingdom.

The study of astrology, which had survived from ancient Roman practice, was again popular in the early Renaissance. Ferdinand is flanked by the gods that personify his prowess and the virtues of his reign — Mars, god of war, and Mercury, inspiration of the arts — along with the astrological signs they rule. The classicizing architectural frame, the clear volumes of the central figure, and the mythological references all reveal Gagini's familiarity with antiquity and the increasing integration of classical motifs into art at this time.



Pedro Berruguete and workshop

Spain, c. 1450–1503/4

The Last Supper

c. 1495–1500

Distemper on linen

74 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 130 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (189.5 x 330.8 cm)

Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation,

M.90.171

Pedro Berruguete was born in Paredes de Nava near Palencia in 1450. Nothing is known of his early life, but in the 1470s he was in Italy working for the duke of Urbino. Berruguete was the most innovative Spanish painter of the later fifteenth century, combining the monumental naturalism of the Italian Renaissance with the emotional intensity and fine detail of the Hispano-Flemish tradition. Berruguete's oeuvre is still being debated by modern scholars; several works by him or his studio have been identified, however, including *The Last Supper*. The subject was popular in the early Renaissance as a decoration for monastic refectories (dining halls). This version was most likely painted for the refectory of a monastery in Castile. The work is of a type known in Spain as a *sarga*, a water- and glue-based (distemper) painting done on a fine linen support to approximate the dry, grainy texture of fresco.

The Last Supper as described in the New Testament Gospels was actually a seder, the ceremonial meal at the beginning of Passover, and the artist has included the traditional foods: lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, salt, and wine. At the feast Jesus initiated the most important ritual of the Chris-

tian church, the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which he equated the bread and wine with his body and blood. Berruguete shows Christ holding the wafer used during the Renaissance (and still used in some Christian denominations) to represent the bread. It was also at this meal that Jesus announced to his disciples, "One of you shall betray me," and as the apostles gesture in distress at this news, the traitor Judas, depicted at far right with a black halo, clutches his reward. In this painting Berruguete exhibits a keen eye for detail, the ability to observe and render modulations of light, and a love of rich pattern, such as that in the brocade behind Christ.

An unusual aspect of the image is the inclusion of Mary Magdalen. Crying profusely, she uses her hair to wipe the feet of Christ before anointing them. According to the Gospels, this episode took place elsewhere, several days prior to the Last Supper. The conflation of the two stories is very rare, and the reasons for it remain a mystery. Note that the shadow cast by the Magdalen's ointment jar falls in opposition to the rest of the shadows in the picture. This and the fact that the vessel is painted in a different style from the rest of the painting suggest that it may have been added by a later hand to more clearly identify Mary Magdalen.

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